

Six Articles on Church Revitalization by Dr. Terry Rials

Dear friend, I have developed this series of articles to introduce the process of church revitalization to church members. Numerous associations and even state conventions have used these articles to get the conversation going in their ministry contexts. I give you permission to use these articles in your newsletters and web pages, if you believe they will help you to begin church revitalization with those you serve. I only ask that you do not substantially alter the articles and that you include my name as author.



The Task of Church Revitalization by Dr. Terry Rials (part one of six in the series)

The church in America is in big trouble – that’s what all the experts are saying. The church has been in a serious decline for a long time. Scholars cannot even agree upon when the decline began, but Southern Baptist Churches have experienced a steady decline in baptismal rates since 1956, its banner year. It has been sliding downhill since. In the last decade, Southern Baptist Churches have seen church membership decline by 10%, Sunday School decrease by 15%, baptisms drop over 30%, and the number of people joining Baptist churches plummet by nearly 50%! It’s easy to talk about the churches somewhere else who are experiencing this, but this phenomenon is hitting too close to home. We have this problem right here in our Association. As I look at the statistics, it’s happening to nearly ninety percent of the churches in the Association, maybe even to the one to which you belong.

What are we doing about this steady decline? Some sit around and talk about the ‘good old days’ and do nothing because they don’t agree with what is happening. Some ascribe blame and we’ve seen plenty of that. Some blame those who hold to an old, outmoded traditionalism, which isn’t working anymore. Some blame the mega churches of stealing members from smaller churches. Some blame their pastor or denominational leaders for the decline. Some blame the lack of door-to-door evangelism, the lack of churches holding revivals, the lack of discipleship training programs, or failure of the church to keep up with culture. The truth is – there is enough blame to go around. For many of you, this is the first time you’ve heard of this problem.

As in the days of Nehemiah, we need to look around at our crumbling walls and discover that we are a *reproach* to the name of our Lord (see Neh1:3). A reproach is a condition of shame, an occasion given to the enemy for him to exult in our defeat. Every Sunday with an empty parking lot, an empty building, and empty altar is a reproach to his name. We need earnest repentance, honest admission, and public confession (Neh 2:17). The problem is with us, all of us.

The good news is that leaders are addressing this problem like never before. We learned that it doesn’t come from a national movement; we’ve seen plenty of those in the past fifty years. The *Church Growth Movement*, the *Church Health Movement*, the *Missional Church Movement*, and the *Emerging Church Movement* have each tried to turn-around the church, so far with very limited success. The real pattern for success is the biblical one, alluded to by

famed preacher G. Campbell Morgan, who metaphorically challenged young preachers to put their sailboats out into the water, put up the sail, and wait for the wind to blow. We need a movement of God, but the wind of God isn't blowing.

In the next five articles, I would like to explore the journey of leading churches back to vitality and life. We'll explore how to set the sails and wait for the wind of God to blow.



The Task of Church Revitalization by Dr. Terry Rials (part two of six in the series)

The church is like a sailboat, but a sailboat is powerless. It has been said that without the wind, a sailboat can only claim the title of organized driftwood. They have no engine, no motor, and no oarsmen. The sailboat is completely dependent upon the wind; in fact, it is *designed* to harness the wind. The church is powerless without the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. The church was designed to catch the wind of revival. The upper room disciples felt the mighty rushing wind and in a matter of hours they changed the world.

The church is floundering because it has no power in it. Most churches can function in their normal program and ministry for an indefinite period of time without the work of the Holy Spirit because most churches are not dependent upon Him. To be sure, a few churches have had their lamp removed, which Jesus threatened to do in Revelation 2:5. These churches will surely die. Sadly, when God's presence leaves, it is possible to be completely unaware of it. For example, Samson did not realize that the Lord had left him after his hair was cut (Judges 16:20). Could the church be unaware that His glory has departed?

Shouldn't we just shut down some of these weak or sick churches that are going to die anyway? Some argue that revitalization is a futile effort because as Bill Easum puts it, "The only solution for spiritually dead congregations is resurrection. You cannot revitalize something that is dead. They must be brought to life again!" You already know that Southern Baptists have no authority over any local church. Some Baptist leaders suggest that these churches close their doors or give their property away to another church or mission, which is honorable, or find some other way to continue in ministry. In numerous conversations with pastors, I sense that pastors and churches are seeking permission to die, but we're on a slippery slope - once we start scuttling churches in trouble, your church may be next.

God can revive, refresh, and renew the church any time He chooses to do so. We are praying that He does just that and soon. Revival is the extraordinary work of the Holy Spirit producing extraordinary results...the re-entry of Christ's manifest presence, according to Richard Owen Roberts. It overthrows the status quo and refreshes His kingdom purposes on earth. Revitalization is the work we do to ensure that the conditions of God are met for revival and in order that the people of God are prepared when the Sovereign God begins to move.

In the next four articles, we will explore how we go about the task of revitalizing a church, bringing it back to life and vitality.



The Task of Church Revitalization by Dr. Terry Rials (part three of six in the series)

How do we begin the task of church revitalization? Let's start by creating an environment or habitat for revitalization to happen. It takes some cultivation to produce a healthy garden, and it takes some careful cultivation and a healthy environment within the church to turn the church around. Even if the church is sick, weak, plateaued, or declining, it can have a healthy attitude going into a revitalization project.

First, churches must create an environment that is safe for their pastor to lead this effort. From my research, I have discovered most pastors do not know what to do, or if they do, they are afraid to do it. If they don't know what to do, they aren't confident to lead their churches in revitalization. The pastor of today's church needs specialized training and ministry coaches if he hopes to turn the church around. Sometimes pastors are often afraid to address problems in the church out of fear – fear of confronting sin in the church, fear of losing people, fear of committing to the three-year process of revitalization, or fear of losing their jobs. Churches can be a hostile environment – 1,600 evangelical pastors leave the ministry each month in the United States. Put another way, 90% of all pastors will not stay in ministry until retirement. Did you know that pastors are not eligible for unemployment insurance?

Second, in order for a church to experience revitalization, it must develop an environment of spiritual honesty and confession. Nehemiah was honest when he told the Jerusalemites, "You see the bad situation we are in..." (Neh 2:17). The *halo effect* is the tendency to speak about the church or spiritual issues in only a favorable light. If you ask most preachers or church members about their church attendance, they will often give a number that is *better* than reality. It is possible that they truly believe what they say and do not intend to be deceptive, but neither is it completely honest. The reality is that most people in the church do not know the numbers. The Sunday School placards are long gone from most sanctuaries because we don't want to look at the bad news. One-third of our churches do not even report their data to the convention at all. Is your church completing and submitting its annual church profile? We've got to get honest.

Third, and most importantly, we have to create an environment of prayer. Prayer meetings are too often "organ recitals;" we pray for people's body parts. Intercessory prayer is important, but it should include the life and health of the church. We need prayers of confession that plead with God to change us. Prayer is developing an intimacy with the God who saves us. Pray for personal renewal first before you pray for revitalization of the church. Some of the greatest revivals in history came when people prayed AND earnestly confessed their sins before God.

The next three articles will explore further this process of church revitalization.



The Task of Church Revitalization by Dr. Terry Rials (part four of six in the series)

Not every leader can help a declining organization turnaround and thrive again. The business world has known this for quite some time. Businesses can go out, find these amazing leaders, and hire them away from other corporations. They can offer exorbitant salaries

because leaders with these skills are well worth their investment! Of course the church cannot just hire its leaders like CEOs; leaders of the church are shepherds, called into ministry by God, gifted by the Holy Spirit, empowered with the authority of the Word of God, and called by a church to serve. A large percentage of the pastoral leadership in the church today has never had *any* training in revitalization leadership.

Our Associational leadership is convinced that leaders of today's church can be equipped in this task of church revitalization; this training was never a part of their college and seminary training. When these church leaders were trained, the church field was very different than the field is today. We were in the midst of a great time of church expansion, called the Church Growth Movement. Sadly, that time of expansion is over.

Some churches cannot wait around for academia to train the next generation of pastoral leaders; they need help right now! Many of our pastors know their churches are in trouble and need this training today! Churches often know they are in trouble, but do not know where to begin. Many churches blame their pastors and falsely assume that a new pastor is the solution; it is doubtful that a new pastor will instantly solve the problems that a church has had for years. Our predicament is just that – *our* predicament. Let's stop assigning blame and begin looking for solutions. Pastors make plenty of mistakes, as a pastor, I freely admit that, but church members make mistakes too. Think of it this way – your current pastor *is* or *can be* the best pastor you'll ever have. Let's get behind our pastors and go to work alongside them to turn these churches around!

Our Association is developing training for the pastors and key church leaders as we speak. I have a significant role in developing this training. The training will consist of two primary topics, revival and revitalization. Revival is the extraordinary work of the Holy Spirit producing extraordinary results. God can decide to revive His church at any time, and I hope He does, because America has not had a sustained nationwide revival in over 100 years, the longest spiritual drought in our history. And there is a reason for it. We need to do the work to ensure that the conditions of God are met for revival, so the church is prepared when the Sovereign God begins to move, that is revitalization! This training begins in November. I pray this is the beginning a great movement of God in our day, but we have obstacles to overcome. Some of these, we'll explore in article five.



The Task of Church Revitalization by Dr. Terry Rials (part five of six in the series)

The church revitalization process has several obstacles to overcome. These obstacles are scary to face and difficult to address. The first set of obstacles to overcome for a church is pride, selfishness, and self-deception. Gary McIntosh, in his book *The Dark Side of Leadership*, says that the very first human leadership failure was the result of these sins. These very sins led to the fall of man, which resulted in their separation from perfect fellowship with God. The same is true today. Our sins keep us from the fellowship with God that He intends. Our plateaued and declining churches have wonderful people in them who truly love God, but perhaps we have forgotten that the church is a missionary body that seeks the redemption of the lost at all costs. We should not delude ourselves any longer. With nearly 90% of our churches plateaued and

declining, we must reject our pride, take ownership of our problems, and address our situations honestly and directly.

The second set of obstacles to revitalization includes the problem of entrenched leadership, church passivity, and congregational age, which are all related. These take a bit more explanation. Churches owe a debt of gratitude to many people who have been faithful and supportive of their churches for years, but because few new people come into the church, there are very few new leaders in the church. Existing leaders can become entrenched and take too much ownership of their positions, which drives away potential new leaders. These entrenched leaders can become a real obstacle to growth. They may resist or even oppose pastoral leadership and can be threatened if new ways are suggested. They can exert control, become watchdogs of the pastor and staff, and assume responsibility to preserve the traditions of the church. This situation is repeated over and over again. The truth is, churches truly love these members, and they should, but failing to address our entrenched leadership problem hurts the church. Long-term leadership also creates *passivity*, which stems from long-term leaders becoming tired. They become passive and often do the minimum that is required. These people are not entrenched leaders, they are just exhausted. New leadership brings new ideas, new ways, and new energy for the church. If churches do not grow, then the congregation just gets older – together. In general, the older congregation finds itself in more trouble than a younger one. By far, the healthiest churches in America are multi-generational churches with every age proportionally represented, and those with a steady influx of new leadership. We must admit that some change is necessary and good, and many churches will be helped with some newness. The Association wants to help churches address these problems; we have amazing leadership and proven ways to help churches to do this.

Look for the last article in this series, which may be the most important of all.



The Task of Church Revitalization by Dr. Terry Rials (sixth and final article in the series)

The plateaued and declining church needs to do something. Church and denominational leaders need to do something. We have spent enough time ringing the bell, shouting that there is a hole in the boat. It's time to fix the hole. The more I study the existing church, the more convinced I am that the people in the pews want to see their churches turn around too. There is some disagreement on what must happen, but I would say that most are ready for some positive change. Here is some sage advice:

First and foremost, pray about church revitalization. Pray and seek God's face for this undertaking. Nehemiah prayed both day and night for four months before he ever took action (Neh 1:4,6). Nehemiah's first recorded prayer began with praise, proceeded to intercession for his people, and ended in confession of sin, both his own and those of his people (Neh 1:5-7). For a man so well known for his actions, Nehemiah spent a great deal of time being still in prayer before the Lord.

Second, affirm your pastor and his leadership in the church. The vast majority of pastors love their churches and work very hard in their callings. He is probably doing the best he can, but he may need to hear this – that you and other key leaders will work *with* him to renew the

church. He cannot make these changes by himself. Most pastors do not know what to do to revitalize their churches, so encourage your pastor to seek specialized training in revitalization, which the Association makes available to the pastors.

Third, get to the point that you and your pastor can speak about your circumstances openly and at length with the church. Nothing is worse than attempting to effect change without the help and support of the congregation. If the congregation does not know about the problems, how can they help to fix them? DO NOT form another committee to study and report back to the church. A revitalization team is needed, but that comes later.

Fourth, don't be afraid to ask for outside help. One dangerous consequence of pride is the inability to ask for help from others. Your pastor will need help from coaches to guide him into and through this process. The church will need help from sister churches coming alongside to help! That's what the Association is – your sister churches. The Association is asking some of our stronger churches to help, or even to adopt, struggling congregations.

Fifth, address the opposition that comes from revitalization biblically and immediately. The devil hates the church moving in the right direction. Conflict will come from within and without, just ask Nehemiah! Confess sin and confront sin. Some churches are sick because there is sin in the camp. Stay ever vigilant and learn about spiritual warfare because it is coming.

I invite you to join me in this important task of church revitalization. Ask the Lord to renew the church you serve. I'm here to serve you. Please share your revitalization progress with me, terry@crestviewokc.org.